

Pandemic Influenza (flu)

Key Facts



What is Pandemic Flu?

- An influenza pandemic occurs when a new type of flu spreads rapidly to affect most countries and regions around the world.
- Pandemics have occurred from time to time throughout history – resulting in many deaths.
- Experts predict another pandemic will occur but cannot say exactly when it will happen. When it does, it may come in two or more waves several months apart.
- Pandemic flu is more serious than “ordinary” flu. As much as a quarter of the population may be affected – maybe more.
- Pandemic flu is likely to cause the same symptoms as “ordinary” flu. However, the symptoms may be more severe because nobody will have any immunity or protection against that particular virus.
- A serious pandemic is likely to cause many deaths, disrupt the daily life of many people and cause high demand on health and other services.

What Causes Pandemic Flu?

- Flu pandemics are caused by the appearance of a new flu virus which is very different from “ordinary” flu strains. Few people will have any immunity to this new virus. This allows it to spread widely, easily and to cause more serious illness.

What is Avian Influenza?

- Avian influenza – commonly called “bird flu” – is a flu that occurs naturally in birds.
- One strain of avian flu, the H5N1 virus, has recently killed large numbers of poultry and other birds in a number of countries in Asia and has recently spread into Europe.
- Some people have been infected with the H5N1 virus causing death in approximately one-half of those cases.
- Most human cases of H5N1 have been caused by contact with infected poultry, not from other people who have it.
- Health experts are concerned that the H5N1 virus could change into a form that is highly contagious for humans and that spreads easily from human to human, resulting in a pandemic.

Who is at Risk?

- Once a flu pandemic starts, everybody will be at risk of catching it. Certain groups may be at greater risk than others. Until the virus starts spreading, we will not know for sure who the risk groups will be.

Is There a Vaccine to Protect Against Pandemic Flu?

- There is no vaccine to protect against pandemic flu. A vaccine cannot be made until the new virus has been identified. Before a pandemic starts it is difficult to predict what strain will cause it and even then, predictions may be wrong.
- “Ordinary” flu vaccines will not protect against pandemic flu. But ordinary flu can be very serious so it is important that everyone get a flu shot.
- Medicines called antivirals can be used to treat influenza. They have been shown to be helpful in the treatment of “ordinary” flu and it is likely that they will also be effective in the treatment of a pandemic flu, but their effectiveness won’t be known until the pandemic virus is circulating. Antivirals do not stop the flu from developing but they do help with the symptoms and reduce the time people are sick.

What Can I Do?

You can reduce the risk of catching or spreading influenza during a pandemic by:

- Covering your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing.
- Avoiding non-essential travel and large crowds whenever possible.
- Maintaining good basic hygiene, for example washing your hands frequently with soap and water to reduce the spread of the virus.
- Frequently cleaning hard surfaces such as door handles and shared telephones and keyboards.

If you catch the flu:

- Stay at home and rest.
- Take medicines such as ibuprofen to relieve the symptoms.
- Drink plenty of fluids.

In the event of a pandemic, Federal, State and Local Governments will provide important emergency information. Such information will tell you how you can protect yourself and your family and what to do if you think you are infected.

More information about pandemic flu is available on the web at

www.pandemicflu.gov and www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic

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